

In Nomine Iesu

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O dear Lord, God and Father, you see how worldly wisdom and reason not only profane your name and ascribe the honor due to you to lies and to the devil, but how they also take the power, might, wealth and glory which you have given them on earth for ruling the world and thus serving you, and use it in their own ambition to oppose your kingdom.... Dear Lord, God and Father, convert them and defend us. Convert those who are still to become children and members of your kingdom so that they with us and we with them may serve you in your kingdom in true faith and unfeigned love and that from your kingdom which has begun, we may enter into your eternal kingdom. Amen. (*Luther's Prayers* [1994], p. 44)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for this morning is taken from the third chapter of St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians. We read as follows in Jesus' name:

Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like His glorious body, by the power that enables Him even to subject all things to Himself. ^(ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, "the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God" (1Tim. 1:17), dear fellow redeemed:

Martin Luther never ran for political office. That was not really an option for him in 16th century Germany, which was governed by emperor, electors, and princes. Even if it had been, Luther was not concerned about political revolution. He was interested in the reformation of the church, a church which no longer clearly taught salvation by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith. But in order for the church to go about its proper work, government also needed to recognize its God-given responsibilities and to know the limits to its authority.

Luther explained that God has established two kingdoms. One is the kingdom of God's right hand—His heavenly kingdom—, which is the kingdom of His grace and promises. The other is the kingdom of God's left hand—the temporal kingdom—, which operates by reason and law, by punishment and reward. "Both must be permitted to remain," said Luther; "the one to produce righteousness, the other to bring about external peace and prevent evil deeds. Neither one is sufficient in the world without the other" (*Luther's Works*, Vol. 45, p. 92).

You and I live in both of these kingdoms at the same time. We live in the world and are governed by the laws of our country, and we belong to Christ's spiritual kingdom, which is

governed by His Word. The kingdom of the world may seem more powerful at times, but it will ultimately come to an end. God's spiritual kingdom may seem weaker, but it will endure eternally with Jesus as its victorious Head. This is why, according to God's command, **We Respect the Authorities, but We Worship Only One King.**

I

In 1521, Martin Luther stood before Emperor Charles V, the ruler of a good portion of Europe at that time. He had been summoned before the emperor to answer for what he had been teaching and writing over the past four years. Luther thought he would have the opportunity to explain why he taught what he did on the basis of the Scriptures. But instead, he was ordered to recant (or take back) all of it. Luther refused. How could he deny the teaching of the Bible? He said, "My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant, because it is neither safe nor wise to act against conscience." Was Luther right to respond in this way, or did he fail to show proper respect to the emperor, whose authority was from God?

To answer this question, we should review what the Bible says about the governing authorities. In the thirteenth chapter of Romans, the Apostle Paul wrote, "*Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God*" (v. 1). The Apostle Peter wrote much the same thing in his first epistle, "*Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good*" (2:13-14). This clearly says that the authority of government is established by God. Just as children must honor their fathers and mothers, so citizens should honor the governing authorities (Fourth Commandment).

But there must be some limit to this authority. And there is. Government officials do not have authority from God to disregard His Commandments and abuse their power. Their responsibilities as rulers are to protect citizens from harm, preserve order in society, and uphold and support what is good. God also gives government the authority to assess taxes. As Jesus said, "*Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's*" (Mt. 22:21; also Rom. 13:7).

God has given government no authority over His Church. Government has no authority to tell you what you may and may not believe. It has no authority to legislate what a pastor preaches from the pulpit or what parishioners confess from the pews. It has no call from God to allow one religion or set of beliefs while outlawing another. As Luther stated before Emperor Charles V, a person's conscience is free from any directive of government. Not surprisingly, the emperor was outraged. How dare Luther ignore his demand? He ordered that he should be arrested after which he would be tried as a heretic. But the ruling Elector of Luther's homeland secretly whisked him away to a remote castle, so that his life was spared.

II

Emperor Charles thought he was acting properly and within his authority by condemning Luther. In the same way, the governing authorities in our day may also threaten us and our beliefs because they think they stand on the side of justice. They think that if any progress will be made, it must be done by the efforts of mankind. Others accuse Christians and their Gospel as being the source of the world's problems. Their goal is to silence Christians and ultimately to eliminate them. Today's sermon text predicted this. It says that there are many who "*walk as*

enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things." Such people are not fit to serve in positions of authority, and yet, God lets this happen. Why?

The Christians in the Roman Empire in the first centuries A. D. must have wondered this as no less than ten waves of persecution against them swept through the land. Luther might have asked this when he was condemned by the emperor. We see government officials in our day promoting what is wrong and attacking what is good. But we are in no position to tell God what He should be doing (Rom. 11:34). God may allow wicked rulers as a judgment against an immoral land. Or He may allow it so that a sharper distinction is made between the Church and the world. Or He may use the attacks of a corrupt government to bring wandering Christians back to Him and strengthen their faith. Whatever God's reasons and plans may be, we know that He ultimately works these things out for the good of His children (Rom. 8:28).

We must admit that when we live in times of peace, and when we are happy with our government officials, we are tempted to let down our guard as Christians. Or else we put too much trust in the officials. We think that if this or that person is elected, everything will get better. But if they are not elected, everything will be lost. As citizens of this country in God's left hand kingdom, we have every right to support and vote for whatever policy or politician we think is best, or even to run for political office ourselves. But we must not forget where our true hope lies and where our salvation is found, that is, in Jesus.

III

Jesus is easy to overlook. He came in such humility that hardly anyone believed He was the Messiah sent from God. They were looking for something more – a conqueror's disposition, a dazzling display of power, a real threat to the Roman authorities. Instead He submitted to these authorities. Even as He rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, hailed as a king, He did not come to threaten any earthly rulers. The only thing that worried the Roman governor Pontius Pilate about Jesus, was the prospect of sending an innocent Man to death. Pilate said to Him, *"Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?"* Jesus answered, *"You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above"* (Jn. 19:10-11).

If God did not will the death of His only Son, Pilate could have done nothing with Him. But it was God's will that Jesus should die for the sins of the Jewish leaders who called for His death, for the sins of Pilate, and for the sins of you and me. Jesus hardly looked the part of a king when He was led to Calvary and nailed to the cross. But the sign was right; He was the *"King of the Jews"* (Jn. 19:19). In fact, He is the King of all. On the throne of the cross, wearing thorns for a crown, Jesus single-handedly destroyed the powers of sin, devil, and death that had ruled the world for so long. By His humble sacrifice, He won eternal life in His kingdom for you and for me and for all.

There is no ruler or government that can promise you this. The kingdom of the world can only promise riches and happiness in this life, and it rarely delivers them. Your King promises forgiveness and eternal salvation, and He freely delivers these gifts day in and day out. His grace does not depend on donations to His campaign, or to an impeccable history of loyalty to Him. He remains our merciful King no matter how much we have doubted Him or how often we have looked for help and salvation anywhere else.

Earthly kingdoms, governments, and rulers all topple, but the spiritual kingdom of Christ prevails over every enemy and continues to conquer not by force or by the sword, but only by the Gospel in God's Word and Sacraments (Mt. 16:18). Luther wrote in his great reformation hymn that even if our enemies take away our "kindred, goods, and life, / We freely let them go, / They profit not the foe; / With us remains the kingdom" (ELH 251, v. 4).

With us remains the kingdom and its King. No matter what happens in our country in the future, we will pray for our elected officials (1Tim. 2:1-2) and obey them as far as God's Word permits. But we will worship only one King, because "*our citizenship is in heaven.*" When Jesus our King returns in all His glory, the great and powerful rulers and government officials of this world will all fall to their knees and will have nothing more to say except "*that Jesus Christ is Lord*" (Phil. 2:11).

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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